

Wishful Nationalism

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Review of Yael Tamir, *“Why Nationalism”* (Princeton University Press, 2019)

Progressives are getting nostalgic for nationalism. Yascha Mounk looks to “domesticate” nationalism, in a way that “does not shy away from celebrating the nobility of this collective identity.” Jill Lepore asks, “[I]s there any option other than to try to craft a new American history—one that could foster a new Americanism?” Francis Fukuyama proposes a “new American identity” to supplant multicultural politics on the left.

“Why Nationalism” is an important contribution to this growing literature. Yael Tamir elegantly recounts nationalism’s virtues. The nation is a formidable historical institution. There has been a lot to like about the nation as a location for the robust redistribution of resources and for the protection of rights. It has generated the institutional scaffolding for a highly salient form of human community.

For liberals, for whom nationalism has been something of a bad word at least since the mid-20th century, it’s an example of not appreciating something until you lose it. Forgotten or at least finessed are nationalism’s historical pathologies, but that’s an easy thing about hindsight, too. It’s like the family vacation—stressful at the time but splendid in the collective memory of the photo albums.

The diagnosis is compelling: The erosion of the state is in many ways lamentable. But on the prescriptive side, Tamir and other

liberal nationalists come up short. There is a lot of wishful thinking in the liberal nationalist revival, as if the mere articulation of nationalism’s virtues will restore the institution to its former glories. On the contrary, the community that undergirded the modern nation-state is now beyond repair. No snapping of policymaking fingers will bring it back. Nor is it a matter of recapturing nationalism from conservative elements who are putting it to work to illiberal ends, for they aren’t really nationalists in a meaningful sense. The sooner liberals and others recognize that the nationalism they now yearn for is lost, the less chaotic and conflictual the path to something different will be.

Tamir, a longtime exponent of liberal nationalism, persuasively paints the nation as quenching a human need for community. The nation and its associated state are not merely instrumental; they have given our lives meaning that might otherwise have been lacking. Nationalism endows the state “with intimate feelings linking the past, the present, and the future,” inducing in individuals “mutual dependencies and responsibilities and invigorat[ing] the will to jointly pursue common ends.” It has given us some reassurance against the fear that “our life will end leaving no traces behind.” Coupled with these existential virtues, the good nationalism has bound us across various lines. It promised, in particular, a foundation for cross-class coalitions.

This descriptive material is compelling, as far as it goes. On nationalism's past ascendancy there is no doubt a tendency here, as with all other liberal nationalist work, to ignore nationalism's many great historical pathologies. Tamir rather too quickly brushes aside nationalism's darker tendencies. "I am well aware of its harmful aspects and destructive powers," she writes. "[M]uch has been written on these issues, and readers can find a better analysis elsewhere." She literally brackets nationalism's inherently segregative element, noting that in contrast to earlier times in which other forms of status were ascendant, "membership in the nation became the only relevant criteria for inclusion (and exclusion)." Tamir implicitly accepts the normativity of exclusion, a liberal orientation that dates back to Michael Walzer at least. (Most other major liberal theorists, John Rawls most notably among them, simply ignored questions of societal exclusion.)

Tamir tries quietly to finesse the normative challenge. Most people, she stresses, stay put in their country of birth, migrants accounting for only 3 percent of the world's population. But that's hardly a justification for exclusion, since many more would move if they didn't face barriers to entry. She also vaunts a "polycentric nationalism, which respects the other and sees each nation as enriching a common civilization" as opposed to "ethnocentric nationalism, which sees one's own nation as superior to all others."

"Why Nationalism" thus mostly ignores the historical role of war and conflict in building national community. War has been the best kind of cement for national solidarity. It was during war that marginalized groups in the United States made their greatest progress toward equality within the nation. African Americans clearly benefited from both World War II and the Cold War. But others were cast out (Japanese Americans and communists, for example) as an incident of

community construction. So one does not even have to look at the treatment of full outsiders, on brutal killing grounds, to find the bugs. It's hard to come up with historical examples of nationalism that haven't been girded by conflict with other nation-states.

Tamir also fails to isolate the solidarity-enhancing consequence of military conscription. The military was a 20th-century site for intensive bonding across the full range of national divides, at least among males. It was how young men got to know their fellow citizens from other parts of the country, of other ethnicities. The city boys got to know the country boys. It was how the elites got to know the middle and working classes, for, importantly, military service was genuinely universal until Vietnam. The community building was deep, even when it wasn't in the trenches.

All this is being lost, as Tamir understands. There is the "disintegration of unifying narratives," in part the result of ascendant multiculturalism, which has "made the notion of a national collective very ambiguous." Banal nationalism, comprising the everyday totems of membership, is also fraying. Above all, this results from the detachment of elites from their national communities and their orientation to the global market. For the elites, "national ties have become relics of the past—sentimental perhaps but of decreasing social and economic value." The growing rift "between the haves and the have-nots leads them to hold different values, norms, and political beliefs." The gap gives rise to increasingly "separate, hostile identities."

This is exactly correct. It is no coincidence that this is happening at a time when we face no real adversary in the form of other nation-states. The Cold War did a lot to keep us together. Even terrorism had some solidarity-enhancing effect, at least in the wake of 9/11. (It's conventional wisdom that it took 9/11 for the rest of the country to think of New York City as part of the

United States.) But that threat has dissipated, and is in any case asymmetric, insofar as terrorists do not themselves constitute a nation. It thus does little work in terms of setting up a “them” to our “us.” Iran and North Korea are not going to do the trick. (As for Russia, more on that below.) Military conscription is a thing of the long past, and efforts to revive it or some national service equivalent have gone nowhere.

Tamir’s description errs in important respects. First, it assumes that non-elites (in the United States, substitute “Trump voters”) are more truly nationalist than their elite compatriots, because they “express a clearer national identity” than members of the more affluent classes. That seems suspect. No doubt those who wear the label spout ostensibly patriotic themes and harken back to times of putatively purer national spirit. But they hardly have a better command on national narratives. Quite the contrary, of course. More tellingly, they are engaging in their own kind of globalism. They have forged a new “nationalist international” in which leaders of populist movements (the better descriptor) conspire together against their globalist adversaries. Trump, Farage, Orbán, Netanyahu, Putin—they have more in common with each other than with their national opponents. This is true not just at the leadership level. The rank-and-file now cavort, on the internet and elsewhere, with their politically sympathetic counterparts in other countries.

If the nationalists are doing it, it goes without saying that the globalists are. “Why Nationalism” represents national community as if it’s an all-or-nothing proposition: You either have a national community or you have no community at all. In Tamir’s telling, elites are soulless cosmopolitans. Some surely are, but broadly defined (extending beyond the Davos crowd) they are finding community elsewhere. Religion is enjoying a resurgence, even among elites. Transnational communities of other

descriptions have emerged in recent decades, some finding homes in nongovernmental organizations of endless description, representing identities aligned across race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and a spectrum of political orientations, including environmentalism and human rights advocacy, all of them facilitated by the communications revolution. (Tamir mentions the internet only in passing.) Transnational professional communities are on the rise, as are multinational corporations that in some cases garner stronger affinity than states. And, yes, Davos itself is a kind of community, even if it’s decidedly not cross-class. People will get community where they can find it.

Perhaps most promising is the revival in local and regional community. In the United States, many cities comprise thriving, solidaristic communities. See, for example, descriptions from columnist David Brooks and a recent book from James Fallows and Deborah Fallows on a range of successful cities, including ones in Trumpland. Tamir herself allows that many elites have “adopted the identity of the megacities they inhabited, being Tel-Avivians, New Yorkers, Londoners, or Berliners, rather than Israeli, American, English, or German.” And what’s so bad about that? Local community is familiar in the sense that it implicates traditional public governance. It seems well positioned to cultivate solidarities across class and other divides, insofar as there are certain spatial aspects of everyday life that require a collective response. (Also think sports, which is perhaps the best remaining vehicle for cross-class solidarity.)

But Tamir would have us revive nationalism, “a new kind of nationalism that is rational and well calculated.” Never mind that rationalism seems inherently to contradict the mythical elements of all national narratives (Tamir elsewhere—quite rightly—highlights the fable of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree); there is no sense for how as a practical matter this can be accomplished.

In a closing chapter entitled “This Is the Time,” Tamir asserts that national sentiments “should be used to induce a readiness to rebuild a cross-class coalition.” How, exactly? She telegraphically suggests “state planning” can help do the trick. She vaunts that favorite tool of liberal nationalists, civic education, however difficult it might be to see how “we” are going to agree on an appropriate curriculum that works for both Texas and New York. She wants to “mak[e] globalism the selfish choice and nationalism the moral one.” I guess Bill Gates should be sending his money to unemployed miners in Kentucky rather than working to rid the world of malaria.

In the end, it’s hard to see how in fact the nation, at least the nation of the United States, is going to be put back together again. Using “nation” metaphorically in considering putative elites and everyone else, “Why Nationalism” observes that “[m]embers of the two nations rarely meet, live nearby one another, have a serious conversation, or befriend each other.” She might have added that we get our news from separate sources and can’t even agree on the same facts. Increasingly members of the two camps see each other as the enemy.

A recent photo from a Trump rally shows two supporters sporting T-shirts that said, “I’d rather be a Russian than a Democrat.” That about sums it up. If the nation is a “daily referendum,” it is losing every day.

We are in a difficult time. One gets the sense from Tamir and other liberal nationalists that they have retreated to nationalism out of a failure of imagination; they can’t conjure up any other form of community that will as effectively advance their redistributionist and rights-protecting ends. However true that may be, magical thinking won’t make it so. Tamir starts “Why Nationalism” with the right questions, “Who are we? What defines our common political identity? Why should we trust one another?” It’s not at all clear how these questions should be answered. But it is increasingly clear that they won’t be found in the nation as we know it.

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